



“Be prepared for the worst”

As a GP specializing in addiction treatment, Dr. Bill Campbell is used to dealing with disturbed patients. However, nothing prepared him for the psychotic visitor who barged into his office in 1996.

The patient, who Campbell had sent away because he wasn't willing to quit taking drugs, walked past Campbell's receptionist and into the doctor's office, demanding that he “take this thing out of his rectum.” Campbell says he had no previous indication that the man was psychotic, so at first he thought he'd missed diagnosing bowel cancer. The patient soon clarified that: he said Campbell had planted a radio receiver in his rectum.

He then grabbed the phone from Campbell, who was in the midst of a call, slammed it down and punched Campbell in the face. “He kept saying ‘I'm going to kill you.’”

Campbell had a back door to his office. “I asked him to come with me to get the receiver out, and we went out the back door into the main hallway. When he realized he'd been tricked he hit me again and knocked me out briefly. I came too and saw his boot

and I thought he was going to kick me, but another guy came along and he took off.”

The receptionist had called 911 immediately and the police arrived. By the time they arrested the man, he had a knife. He was convicted of assault and later committed suicide.

Campbell needed a couple of stitches in his lip and a week off work to recover. When he returned to work he spent some money on a tempered glass window that allows his receptionist to see into the waiting area. He also installed locks on her door, allowing her to control access to his office.

Campbell recommends a 3-level approach to preventing violence in the workplace. First, don't let it happen: be aware of the possibility of danger and do what you can to prevent it. Second, make sure you have control. Finally, be prepared to act quickly.

“Patients I deal with can be threatening, but when they're psychotic and threatening there's not much you can do, so be prepared for the worst.

“I'm more careful now,” says Campbell. “It's not going to happen to me again.”

Physicians can also take steps to protect themselves and staff members:

- Ask the police to hold a personal safety seminar for all staff.
- Leave the examining-room door open if concerned about a patient.
- If a person is encountered while you are working late or alone, indicate that someone else is nearby: “My partner will be right with you.”
- Always escort visitors to their destination, and consider introducing a visitor logbook and name tags. If a stranger is wandering about, offer assistance.
- Review your emergency plan and ensure everyone knows what to do if there is an incident.
- Do not allow staff to give out names, role, home phone numbers or addresses over the phone.
- Develop code words for alerting one another to danger.

Experts warn that all threats of violence should be taken seriously. Those being threatened should stay as calm as possible and watch for signs of anger, such as clenched fists, while keeping their own hands in view, above the waist and with palms open. They should keep their distance by staying about a leg-length away, and they should never block a person's exit route or try to take a weapon from him.

After the incident, police should be informed immediately and post-traumatic counselling should be offered. Written or recorded messages should be kept as evidence and a note should be made in the person's medical record. Witnesses should be asked to make notes about the incident and the patient should be dismissed from the practice in writing. If applicable, the referring physician should be informed.

Security at home

Danger can follow physicians home. Several Canadian physicians have been murdered in their homes in the last 10 years, including at least one who was killed by an ex-patient. The police, who will conduct a home-safety audit if asked, say physicians should not list their home phone number and they should ensure that it is removed from phone Web sites.

They should also carry a cell phone, avoid being alone in a parking lot or garage, and avoid travelling alone after hours.

In light of the shootings that have wounded 3 physicians in their homes since 1994, they should also be wary of unfamiliar cars or “out-of-the-ordinary” people or incidents anywhere near their home. ?